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A

LETTER

TO THE

RIGHT HONOURABLE

LORD NORTH,

ON HIS

PROPOSITIONS

IN FAVOUR OF

IRELAND.

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DUBLIN:

PRINTED BY M. MILLS, No. 135, CAPEL-STREET.

M.DCC.LXXX.

BRITISH MUSEUM

A

LETTER

TO THE

Right Hon. Lord NORTH.

My Lord,

FROM what has fallen from your Lordſhip in regard to Ireland, I conceive you are greatly miſinformed, as to the ideas of the people at large. It is of the utmoſt conſequence, in ſuch a moment as this, that our ſentiments ſhould not be miſunderſtood. If they are, apparent ſatisfaction may conceal real jealouſy and diſtruſt; the bane of friendſhip in nations, as well as in Men.

Your Lordſhip dwells on the addreſs of our parliament being a petition for indulgence, not a demand of rights. My Lord, I conceive that addreſs was to the KING OF IRELAND, without whoſe approbation our laws cannot be altered or enlarged. If your Lordſhip conceives that it was a ſupplication to the parliament of Great-Britain, I apprehend you are miſtaken. When the parliament of Ireland addreſſed their King, and told him that nothing but a FREE TRADE could ſave their country, they could not, I am perſuaded they did not, forget why Ireland had not a Free Trade; they could not forget that Ireland was bound by Britiſh acts of parliament.

But, my Lord, ſhould it even be poſſible that our parliament could forget the Great Queſtion of Right, it cannot be forgot by the people; they know it, and will remember it. As one of that people, I deem it eſſential to freedom, and think myſelf juſtified as a man entitled to be free, to publicly argue for my own and my countrymens'

mens' rights. The inveſtigation of truth cannot be improper. In this inſtance, I am convinced that the ſureſt mode of promoting the welfare of both kingdoms, is to have our connexion fully explained and perfectly underſtood.

As an Iriſhman, give me leave to expreſs my obligations to your Lordſhip, for the kind intentions which you have manifeſted to my country; I do not even believe my countrymen want more than it is your wiſh to give. But, my Lord, they want it in a different mode; they want what they have a right to, ſeparated from the bounty of England. It ſhall therefore be the object of this letter to point out my own, and what I apprehend to be their reaſons, for wiſhing for ſuch a diſtinction.

At firſt, my Lord, your propoſitions, which have now in part become a law, gave pretty general ſatisfaction. Men hitherto reſtrained in almoſt every branch, naturally rejoiced at the firſt view of an extended commerce;

merce; but when reaſon had inveſtigated the principles, on which that extenſion was given; when it was found to be a matter of EXPEDIENCY, not of right; when it was perceived that it rather eſtabliſhed than relinquiſhed the power of Britiſh legiſlation over Ireland, * our tranſports ſunk into a very moderate degree of pleaſure; and even that pleaſure was leſſened by the precariouſneſs of enjoyment.

My Lord, we claim to be a kingdom, with every right belonging to a kingdom; governed by our own legiſlature, the King, Lords, and Commons of Ireland. We complain of the Britiſh legiſlature making laws to bind Ireland. We alledge it is without right, and we require that the legiſlature of Great-Britain ſhould relinquiſh a claim that we ſay they are not entitled to, and that they ſhould obliterate the name of Ireland from their Statutes.

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* The Act of Parliament lately made, only repeals part of the Engliſh acts binding Ireland.

This is a ſhort creed, but like all creeds admits of much explanation; let us fairly diſcuſs it; the examination will be no impeachment even to your Lordſhip's abilities, though it ſhould oblige you to correſpond with a man ſo much your inferior in rank and underſtanding. If my ideas, if the ideas of my countrymen are unjuſt and unreaſonable, we are ſurely entitled to an explanation why they are ſo. If they are juſt and reaſonable, they ſhould be complied with. If they are juſt and reaſonable, and not complied with, we have a right to do ourſelves JUSTICE, if ever we have the power.

Here, my Lord, I ſhall beg leave to aſk two queſtions: Is the kingdom of Ireland conſidered by the legiſlature of Great-Britain as a CONQUERED NATION? If not, is Ireland conſidered as a FREE KINGDOM, united with England by long uſage, ſimilarity of manners, vicinage, and a common King?

If we are deemed a conquered nation, and as ſuch to hold every thing we poſſeſs at the will of the Engliſh, our conquerors; if we are in all things ſubject to their caprice; ſtill, my Lord, there is one right that I apprehend cannot be taken from us: It is a right I almoſt bluſh to mention; it is the right of the vanquiſhed; the right of regaining our Freedom, whenever we are able to throw off your yoke. If you ſay, as I truſt you will, that we are a Free People, you muſt allow us thoſe rights which are indiſpenſably neceſſary to the very exiſtence of Freedom; and if on enquiry it ſhould be found that Ireland has not ſuch rights, becauſe Great-Britain has exerted an arbitrary power to which ſhe was not entitled, Great-Britain muſt either relinquiſh ſuch an invaſion of our rights, or ſupport it, as ſhe made it—By Power.

What, my Lord, conſtitutes the freedom of a people? What is the boaſted freedom of a ſubject of Great-Britain? Is it not, that he is governed by laws to which he has aſſented

aſſented either by himſelf or his repreſentative? Is it not that he cannot be bound by laws that do not affect thoſe who make them as well as himſelf? What, my Lord, is the definition of a ſlave? Is it not where a man is bound by laws, to which he never aſſented, and lies at the mercy of a power over which he has no controul? Weigh theſe two definitions, and tell me what is IRELAND?

Great-Britain's repealing part of thoſe laws by which I apprehend ſhe has unjuſtly bound Ireland, is no ſatisfaction, nor are we leſs enſlaved. In fact, your propoſitions, and the law founded upon them, eſtabliſhes that power which I, and I believe my countrymen deny. The word expedient conveys a thouſand things repugnant to the rights of Ireland. It may hereafter be deemed expedient to revoke the very indulgences you now find it expedient to grant. It may be expedient to diſſolve our parliament, and never call another; it may be expedient to tax Ireland by a Britiſh act of parliament,

and

and enforce it by a Britiſh armament; where ſhall we ſet bounds to expediency, and how can its limits be aſcertained? But, my Lord, I will venture to aſſert, and I now call on your Lordſhip to refute it if you can, that IRELAND is not FREE, whilſt England has the power of binding Ireland by Britiſh acts of parliament. I will venture to aſſert, we are not leſs ſlaves, though Britiſh legiſlation never found it expedient to exert the power it claims; the moſt abſolute Monarch on Earth may make his ſubjects happy, but whilſt he has the means of making them miſerable, they are not, they cannot be FREE.

The Iriſh for a long time remained in ignorance as to their ſituation; thoſe amongſt them who perceived it, thought it would be cruel to ſhow them rights, without a poſſibility of their obtaining them. Particular circumſtances has led them to particular enquiries. Enquiry has made them acquainted with their ſituation; and it is, my Lord, the characteriſtic of my countrymen to be impatient

impatient under wrongs, which they feel and underſtand.

I do not deceive you when I ſay, that this reaſoning is very general amongſt Iriſhmen. I do not deceive you when I ſay, we are attached to England, and ſeek a connexion with her, in preference to the reſt of mankind. But, my Lord, our firſt attachment is to FREEDOM, and every other is a ſecondary conſideration. To be in poſſeſſion of Freedom, we muſt know what is our right. As to favours, we ought, and I am perſuaded are willing to give an equivalent. But, my Lord, we wiſh to have the line between rights and favours aſcertained; the blending them together, if poſſible, we are determined to avoid.

My Lord, we conceive that we are a free people, and as ſuch entitled to a free trade. ——We admit your right to ſhut your ports againſt us, but we claim a ſimilar power as to you. If we are as FREE as England this muſt be the caſe; if we are not, we are

ſurely

ſurely entitled to the reaſons why we are not ſo. —— We ſurely have a right to know why we are excluded from the undoubted privileges of a FREE PEOPLE. Can your Lordſhip blame us if we deem it neceſſary to know how we ſtand in point of right, in regard to Great Britain? We cannot build on a ſure foundation, or expect a laſting fabrick, till this is aſcertained.

Your Lordſhip ſays the Iriſh Parliament is to do certain things, in conſequence of Engliſh reſolutions. How, my Lord, can this be? How can England treat with Ireland, until the Engliſh Parliament relinquiſhes her claim of binding Ireland in all caſes whatſoever? Is it not, my Lord, abſurd? Is it not a contradiction in terms, that an Engliſh Parliament ſhould enter into a treaty with an Iriſh, if an Iriſh Parliament is to be ſubject to the will of an Engliſh; and if an Engliſh act can bind Ireland in all caſes whatſoever.

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I am aware it will be ſaid, that this overture from an Engliſh to an Iriſh Parliament, tacitly admits that an Engliſh Parliament has not a right to bind Ireland. WHY TACITLY? If England means to give up this claim, why not openly? The doing ſo would give confidence here. If on the other hand it ſhould be meant to deceive, to miſlead by the natural idea that muſt ariſe from the one Parliament treating with the other, I will not heſitate in proclaiming it A MEAN SUBTERFUGE—a low CUNNING——unworthy of A MAN——unworthy of A NATION.

In conſequence of your Lordſhip's propoſitions, I will ſuppoſe wealth pouring into this kingdom from every quarter. Here, my Lord, I will again aſk a queſtion: What ſecurity have we for wealth ſo acquired? If you have a right to bind us in all caſes whatſoever, you muſt have a right to tax us. If you have a right to tax us

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one ſhilling, you have a right to twenty in the pound; and had we the wealth of the Indies, whilſt you claim that power, and have force to execute it, we are but a treaſury, filled for the uſe of Great Britain. In abſolute governments, wealth and danger go hand in hand, and poverty is happineſs. If individuals grow rich they dare not enjoy their wealth, and are careful to conceal it. Their lives are often forfeited for ſuppoſed offences, to give a colour to the ſeizing of their acquiſitions. The ſame reaſoning will hold in this inſtance. If, whilſt poor, you claim abſolute power over us, by what chain of reaſoning are we to ſuppoſe you will relinquiſh it, ſhould we become rich? It makes no difference that this power is veſted in the legiſlature of Great Britain, and not in a ſingle hand. Abſolute power in one or in many is the ſame. Its effect is equally deſtructive to the happineſs of a ſtate or individual.

I have

I have frequently obſerved, my Lord, when the ſubject of Iriſh rights has been broached, that the diſtreſſed ſituation of England has been introduced; that England has been repreſented as a nation ſunk in debt, and overwhelmed with difficulties. If it be ſo, I am, and I am perſuaded my countrymen are ſorry for it. But, my Lord, as an Iriſhman, I cannot conceive that I am to be a ſlave, becauſe England has been imprudent or unfortunate. I cannot conceive if England was ſinking, that Ireland is bound in any way, to go to the bottom with England. We are called ſiſter kingdoms, but if we were married, there is but one country* that I have heard of, where the wife ſacrifices herſelf on the funeral pile of the huſband, and I truſt Ireland is not inclined to follow ſo ſingular an example.

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* A country in Aſia, where the bodies of the dead are burned, and the wife is placed on the funeral pile of the huſband.

Be the ſituation of England what it may, what has Ireland to ſay to it? Have we ever expoſed you to war? Have we encreaſed your taxes? Havs we been the cauſe of a ſingle misfortune? If your fleets have protected us, who occaſioned our wanting that protection? Have we not contributed both with our blood and treaſure in ſupport of your quarrels, without ſharing in your conqueſts? Are we not indebted, from our connexion with you, beyond our ability to pay?

My Lord, I will go ſo far as to ſay, if the ruin of England was to follow juſtice to Ireland, yet ſtill we are entitled to that juſtice. The queſtion muſt ſtill reſort to firſt principles, and Iriſhmen cannot, ought not to have a confidence in Great Britain, till thoſe principles are fully aſcertained.

It is ſaid, my Lord, that we have long acquieſced under this claim. For argument ſake I will grant it. England herſelf has been

been obliged in particular times to ſubmit to the moſt ſevere exertions of arbitrary power; but it has been the moſt diſtinguiſhed feature in the character of your countrymen, to watch for and ſeize the moment in which they had the proſpect of regaining their freedom. Witneſs your Barons compelling the infamous John to grant them Magna Charta. Witneſs the decapitation of the miſinformed and unfortunate Charles. And witneſs the glorious Revolution, by which the preſent king of England—of Ireland, is intitled to his crown. Will your Lordſhip then, or your countrymen, be ſo unjuſt as to ſay, we ought to acquieſce in a claim, becauſe we have not hitherto had power to oppoſe it. Will you aſſert if at firſt the claim was unjuſt, it has changed its nature from the inattention or impotence of Ireland?

Strange arguments, however, ſometimes ſuggeſt themſelves. I have heard it argued, my Lord, that the King of Ireland, reſiding

in Great-Britain, gives a right to ſupremacy there. To this there is a ſhort and concluſive queſtion; one, my Lord, that I borrow from the elegant and well-informed Guatimozin—Had the King of Great-Britain been in reality, what he is nominally, King of France; had he held his court at Paris; would Great Britain have allowed the King of Great Britain, in conjunction with the Parliaments of France, to bind them in all caſes whatſoever? Apply this, my Lord, to the ſubject of this letter, and anſwer the queſtion as you pleaſe.

In all connexions between free kingdoms advantages muſt be reciprocal. It muſt be the intereſt of both to preſerve the connexion; or that kingdom who finds herſelf hurt by the alliance, will infallibly quit it the moment it is in her power. Intereſt is the grand-ſpring of action even amongſt men, though a few individuals may glorioufly deviate from it; but between nations it is, it muſt be the ruling principle.

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My Lord, it is my wiſh, and I hope and believe it is the wiſh of every good man in this kingdom, to form an alliance with Great Britain, which nothing can diſturb. I conceive this can only be done by a fair and candid enquiry into the natural rights of each kingdom. If Great Britain treats with Ireland under the idea of giving as little as ſhe can, and that little from neceſſity, Ireland can neither be thankful nor ſatisfied. You yourſelves will ſay that Ireland, from particular ſituation, has got more than you intended for her; and when that ſituation ceaſes, you will naturally endeavour to recal what you have ſo granted.——On the other hand, Ireland looking for an eſtabliſhment of rights, cannot conceive herſelf obliged by what is given from expediency. Whilſt the great queſtion of right remains unaſcertained, mutual jealouſies and diſtruſts muſt affect the peace of both kingdoms. Iriſhmen cannot ſeriouſly wiſh the proſperity of a country which they conceive to be oppreſſing them; and England cannot be cordially our well-wiſher, whilſt

ſhe conſiders us as a people ſhe has wronged; as a people ſhe muſt ſuppoſe anxious for an opportunity of procuring Juſtice.

It may be ſaid, that finding fault is eaſy, but that it will be difficult to point out a mode of relief more ſatisfactory than the one your Lordſhip has adopted; I ſhall, therefore, in a few words, lay down what I believe would be ſatisfactory to my countrymen; what I know would be ſatisfactory to myſelf.

Let England declare ſhe has no right to bind Ireland by Britiſh acts of parliament, and entirely repeal all laws hitherto made for that purpoſe. It has been my endeavour to prove that England in doing this, would only do juſtice;—ſuppoſe it done, Ireland would have a right to trade with all the world—but all the world would alſo have a right of chooſing upon what terms, and in what inſtances, they would enter into commercial alliances with Ireland;

land; Great-Britain of courſe would have a right to ſay, you ſhall not trade with us, but on ſuch conditions as we ſhall think proper to require. The Colonies would have the ſame right; and at this moment Ireland would have leſs than what your propoſitions, and the law founded, and to be founded on them, would give us; but then, my Lord, the matter of right would be adjuſted; whatever wealth we acquired would be the wealth of Freemen, and could not be taken from us but by our own legiſlature; then that frightful ſpirit raiſed in the Reign of Geo. 1ſt. would be laid, and the fears and apprehenſions of Iriſhmen, with the Ghoſt, would vaniſh *.

If, my Lord, we are admitted to trade with Great-Britain and her colonies, I, as an Iriſhman, think we ſhould make a ſuitable return. If your fleets protect us, protect our trade, I think we ought in proportion

* The law declaring a right to bind Ireland in all caſes whatſoever.

proportion to that protection, in proportion to that trade, contribute to their ſupport.——These, my Lord, in my humble apprehenſion, ought to be the ſubjects of treaty between the two legiſlatures; then rights and favours would be diſtinct; a diſtinction which muſt give univerſal ſatisfaction here. If Great-Britain really means to give us a PERMANENT FREE TRADE, what can be her objection to being fully explicit. My Lord, the conſequence would be, that induſtry would diffuſe her bleſſings over this heretofore devoted land; then, my Lord, the merchant would plow the ocean, and the farmer his land with ſatisfaction and ſecurity; then Ireland would become the chearful and powerful ſupporter of Great-Britain.

My Lord, I cannot expect you will take either my word or opinion for the ſentiments of my countrymen; but, my Lord, it is ſurely worth your Lordſhip's attention

tion to enquire how far I am right in my opinion; if by that enquiry, you find that the people of Ireland, almoſt to a man, deny the right in a Britiſh parliament to bind them; if you find that they acknowledge no power on earth but their King, Lords, and Commons; and will not, if they can help it, pay obedience to the laws of any other; I ſubmit it to your Lordſhip, whether it would not be wiſe in the Britiſh legiſlature to voluntarily declare the Stat. 6th Geo. 1ſt. c. 5. no longer in force, ſo far as relates to Ireland, and that it was made on the miſtaken idea, that England had a right to bind Ireland. This, my Lord, would heal every diſſention, would baniſh every jealous idea from our minds.

Many other things relative to Ireland croud upon my imagination, but as they are in general things that ought to be looked to at home, and as I wiſh to confine myſelf to the one Great Queſtion, I ſhall not longer intrude on your Lordſhip.

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In the courſe of this letter I have endeavoured to ſteer clear of the leaſt offence to your Lordſhip. I have endeavoured to argue without paſſion or prejudice, and I truſt I have in ſome degree ſucceeded.

I feel the fulleſt conviction, that an explanation of the matter of Right is eſſential to the welfare and proſperity of both kingdoms, and it is from that conviction I have thus ventured to addreſs your Lordſhip.

I am, with great reſpect,

your Lordſhip's

moſt humble ſervant,

FRANCIS DOBBS.

Dublin, 1ſt Jan. 1780.

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